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Roger Zelazny and the Comics

by Jane M. Lindskold

Roger Zelazny never kept secret his fondness for comics. He provided introductions to the collected *Books of Magic* and the **Grimjack** graphic novel *Demon Knight*. He was Guest of Honor at the San Diego Comic Con and winner of the Inkpot Award. *The Illustrated Roger Zelazny* (1978), with art work by Gray Morrow contained "Shadowjack," an original Jack of Shadows prequel presented in comic strip format. Artist Jim Zimmerman adapted "The Last Defender of Camelot" into a black and white comic. Less comic-style illustrated Zelazny works include the novel *A Night in the Lonesome October* and *The Visual Guide to Castle Amber*.

At the time of Roger's death, the Amber books were in the process of being adapted into graphic novels with art by Lou Harrison and script by Terry Bisson. Part of this project was reproduced in the 1995 World Fantasy Convention program book at the request of Bisson, who was one of the convention's Guests of Honor. When we spoke, Terry told me he chose to include this, rather than any of his other work, as his tribute to Roger. Another Zelazny comic work in progress is *Shadowlands* from Aries Graphics.

Roger's interest in comics

dates to his earliest years. As he told me in a letter:

I remember reading newspaper comic strips & editorial cartoons as soon as I began to read. Then comic books along w/regular reading. I never stopped enjoying the comics. I'm a fan of comic art & I enjoy good commercial art. (May 13, 1992).

Over the years, Roger read many different titles including *Wolverine*, *X-Men*, and the *Fantastic Four*. He also followed classic strips, especially *The Spirit* and *Modesty Blaise*—some of which he tracked down in reprints. More recent favorites included *Corto Maltese*, *Grimjack*, *Sandman*, and the *Books of Magic*. However, if I was forced to select one comic that remained a perennial favorite throughout his life the answer might surprise his fans—it certainly surprised me.

During our correspondence, Roger introduced me to several of the titles mentioned above. In fact, we entered into an unspoken agreement to buy copies of *Sandman* for each other so that neither of us would miss any of the story. However, it was not until after we had moved in together that Roger let me in on the secret of his comic favorite.

We had stopped by the drugstore newsstand while

waiting for a prescription to be filled. I was checking out the new SF; Roger was scanning the comics. Hearing him chuckle, I went over to see what he was reading and discovered that he had Disney's *Uncle Scrooge* spread on his knee. He looked momentarily embarrassed, then moved the comic so that I could read the story with him. (I did. That issue had something to do with a bear, as I recall).

Roger's enthusiasm for *Uncle Scrooge*—and to a lesser extent *Donald Duck*—became quite evident when I helped him move his comics into our new house. At first I made the mistake of assuming that the brightly colored comics dated to when his kids were younger, but Roger cheerfully told me otherwise. Not only did he read the comic regularly, a friend had made him copies of old strips as well. Occasionally, Roger even clipped *Donald Duck* from the newspaper.

Once we were more settled in our new home, Trent (Roger's middle son and the one who shared his father's fascination with Disney's duck clan) brought over his video tapes of *Duck Tales* and *Darkwing Duck*. Sometimes with Trent, sometimes on our own, Roger and I kicked back and enjoyed the animated adventures of his old "friend."

I could wax philosophical about how I suspect that Roger viewed the stories of Scrooge

McDuck as a commentary on the American Dream, as a version of the Horatio Alger "rags to riches" tale with the twist that, as a miser, Scrooge provides the writers with an opportunity to make cynical quips at the expense of American materialism. I might even be right—but I think a more honest explanation for why Roger enjoyed the adventures of Scrooge McDuck was that they made him laugh.

Those who know Zelazny's writings would be less surprised to learn of Roger's interest in those comics that featured a dark-spirited hero. His introduction to *Grimjack's* graphic novel "Demon Knight" says a great deal about what such a comic had to have in order to gain his praise:

...the protagonist had a tantalizingly complex past—from a home life involving child abuse and fratricide to a youth spent fighting in the Arena, from the intriguing Demon Wars to a doomed love affair with overtones from the Mabinogion—all emerging in snippets, an allusion here, a brief flashback there. Amazing. Most comic's protagonists have sketchier pasts, focusing mainly on The Trauma which made them whatever they are. The majority don't have much of a future either, lurching through episode after familiar episode and winding up pretty much the same as they started out at the end of each. They are, by this definition, flat characters. But John Gaunt/Jim Twilley isn't. He has a past and a future. He has been changed considerably by events. In this sense, the entire series over these past five years has been more in the nature of a novel,

each issue a chapter thereto, than a typical, episodic comic book.

In *Blood of Amber*, Roger paid John Gaunt (Grimjack) the compliment of giving him a cameo as "Old John" who warns Merlin about the thugs in Bloody Bill's bar—and then neatly dispatches them when they follow him out into Death Alley.

John Ostrander, the writer for *Grimjack*, learned of Old John's visit to Amber from one of his fans. His response when Roger confirmed that he was indeed a *Grimjack* fan was one of overwhelming excitement:

I'm a pro. I like to be able to maintain a "pro-face"—you know—say something [like] "Why, thanks Roger and, hey, I like your stuff, too."

But this is *Roger Zelazny*, folks! This is a guy who, when I didn't have any money, would come out with another Amber book and I'd sell **other** books to buy **his** books and he'd have me panting for more.

I mean, this is **Roger Freaking Zelazny** for cryin' out loud and he says he likes what I do *in print* and if you think I'm going to be cool and calm and professional and matter-of-fact about it you are **out of your mind!!!** (*Grimjack* #39 - October 1987)

Sandman is another comic that succeeds in living up to Roger's difficult standard. In his Introduction to the *Books of Magic* Roger comments on Neil Gaiman's work:

I'm always fascinated by his point of attack and by the angles from which he views his people, settings, situations,

actions. It's his approach I study as much as the ideas that he employs.

Roger was introduced to *Sandman*—and to Neil Gaiman—when Neil gave him the collected *Doll's House* at a convention in Dallas, Texas. Like Ostrander, Gaiman is a great admirer of Roger's work. Recently, I spoke over the telephone with Neil about Roger's influence on both Neil himself, and on the comics field at large. Noting that Roger's "influence on all of us, both in comics and in fiction, was immeasurable," Neil continued:

When he [Roger] died, I wound up spreading the news around DC comics and lots of people who had never met Roger were broken up on a level I've only seen when rock stars died... I'd get these phone calls from people who took it personally. And one of the reasons they took it personally was that he made the business of writing look interesting. A lot of writers are Roger's fault. There are a lot of us who without Roger (or if we hadn't read his stuff) would have gone off and done something more sensible.

Many of Gaiman's fans have questioned him about the apparent similarities between the Amber novels and *Sandman*. While not denying either his familiarity with the Amber novels or Zelazny's influence on his work, Neil says that Amber is not what he thinks of when he considers how Roger's work shaped his own:

Most of the correspondences between *Sandman* and Amber are either

coincidences or the necessities of fiction. People are always commenting on the similarities between the sigils and the Trumps, but this was just an example of problem solving—I mean, they don't have telephones and they need to talk to each other so they do it this way.

What *Sandman* was directly—I don't know if 'inspired by' is the right word—was *Lord of Light*. What Roger had originally done was build an equation that worked as well upside down. What Roger did with *Lord of Light* was he did stories about humans becoming gods and tap into whatever makes superheroes work. I did it in reverse.

With a touch of the irony that real life does at least as well as

fiction, one of the last things that Roger read before his own death was the issue of *Sandman* that presented the death of Dream. "The Wake" story-line which followed, especially the later issues, was influenced somewhat by Neil Gaiman's response to attending Roger's wake at Fred and Joan Sabers-hagen's home in New Mexico.

Somehow, there is an odd poetry in these two deaths—of Dream and of an author who inspired his creation—coming so close together. I sincerely hope that, as for Dream, the Death who came for Roger was Morpheus's sweet sister.

